



# Crossroads Cultural Center and Columbia Catholic Ministry

In collaboration with the Center for the Study of Science and Religion

## “WHAT’S FAITH GOT TO DO WITH IT?”

**FAITH AND POLITICS: Do they mix?**

October 15, 2008 at 7:00 pm, Columbia University, New York, NY

**Speaker: Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete**

*\*transcript not reviewed by the speaker*

**Crossroads:** Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. We would like to thank our co-sponsors: the Columbia Catholic Ministry and the Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia. Tonight we are pleased to have Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete give the first in a series of four lectures under the general title “What’s faith got to do with it?” He will talk about the relationship between faith and life in four important human phenomena (politics, science, economics, and affectivity).

In doing this, we would like to avoid two easy traps: the first one is to take this relationship for granted, by making an *apriori* decision that faith has everything to do with these phenomena (or, conversely, that faith has nothing to do with them). On the contrary, we would like to put this supposedly necessary relationship (or lack of it) to the test, and verify experientially whether faith can have an interesting, positive, valuable, impact on these aspects of daily life. The second trap is to assume that, in any case, such a relationship affects primarily the ethical realm, that is, how someone who has faith should or should not behave. On the contrary, we consider that faith is first of all *knowledge*, through revelation, of the mystery of God, which is the mystery of Being, the origin of all created realities. If this is so, in the words of Benedict XVI in Regensburg, faith should “broaden” our reason, give us a better vantage point to look at the world and decipher the workings both of nature and of history.

This is the intuition behind this series: how does faith shed new light on each of these four realities? Does faith reveal something new and previously unnoticed about these things? Does it change the way we should think about them? And then, *as a result*, does it change the way we *live* them?

Tonight’s topic is a good example. It is almost universally assumed that faith’s chief contribution to politics is to provide “values.” Both sides of the political spectrum claim, to some degree, that Christianity is an important source of inspiration. Of course, each side is also perfectly prepared to dismiss faith as a valid motivation when it gives support to policies each doesn’t like. But the question we want to raise tonight is, is that it? Is the relationship between faith and political life just one of ethical guidance? Given that we all agree that Christianity helps us appreciate, say, the value of life or the need for social justice, does it have any deeper impact on the way we live together in society? Does faith give any new insight into political life? Does it make us understand differently the concept of democracy? Do Catholics have a genuinely different view of the role of the state? What about faith and freedom? Does Christianity support political freedom or threaten it? Is the Church in some sense a political reality? Should faith have a social role or should it be a strictly private affair? Is the social doctrine of the Church yet another political ideology? How should it affect the way we approach politics in our country?

Monsignor will help us address all of these questions. For many of us he does not need an introduction, but let me just remind you that Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, a columnist for *The New York Times*, is a physicist by

training. He holds a degree in Space Science and Applied Physics as well as a Master's Degree in Sacred Theology from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. He holds a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome. He is co-founder and has been a professor at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, DC. He has taught at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, NY, and from 1996 to 1997 served as President of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico in Ponce. He is a columnist for the Italian weekly *Tempi*, has written for *The New Yorker*, and has been Advisor on Hispanic Affairs to the US National Council of Catholic Bishops. He is the Responsible of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation in the United States and Canada and he resides in Yonkers, NY.

**Albacete:** Well, the presentation has two parts. The first part here, theory, the second part is the actual lab, and will feature Senator Barrack Obama and Senator John McCain, and that's on your television set at 9 pm. So I'm in a rush to get back, and we promised some people who wanted to come tonight that you could leave on time to go back and watch the debates.

My last public appearance was in some kind of encounter with Mr. Christopher Hitchens over at the Pierre Hotel. Lovely, good food, free drinks, the only problem is that we couldn't have any kind of encounter because we were not talking about the same thing. The question was: Does science render faith obsolete? But I, as I suspected, his view of faith...[Msgr. Albacete's cell phone rings]...There's my phone! Wait a minute. [He answers] Hi! Oh good. We'll take care of that later. Thank you. [He hangs up.] It was Mr. Hitchens. He's converted. [laughter]

Anyway, we weren't talking about the same thing. I found out that if I thought that I saw faith the way he did, I was in agreement with him 95% of the time, which I kept saying again and again. He got very upset and at one point he said, "I've been deceived! I thought I was coming to debate a man of faith!" So it kind of scared me, but anyway, I wanted to make sure that in this series at least I make sure that you understand how I see the question of faith, and instead of following necessarily my own views, though I will not hesitate to give them, I want to make a presentation of what is the contemporary view of faith of the Catholic Church, and in particular, of the present Pope. I figure that should answer whether I have faith or not. So I want to do that.

As to politics, well, we all more or less have a common view of what that may be, but, again it is necessary, if we are to understand each other, that we both have a similar understanding of what these two terms mean, and then the proposal can be made of how they are related. I find most of the problems have to do with what the terms mean rather than the proposal of how they are related. Most of the discussion on faith and politics that I see or hear or read about suffer from that point of view. It's not really a discussion because people are talking about different things. So I feel that's important for tonight and all the other upcoming nights.

I want to begin with something from my own experience. I am a native of Puerto Rico, and I grew up in a Latin American, Catholic atmosphere. Faith was never questioned. We baptize anything that moves, and have lots of celebrations. I never found any conflict with my view of life and the proposals of the faith. I never experienced it until the beginning of my work as a scientist in the laboratory in the Washington, DC area. Friends of mine that I absolutely admired and I wanted them as peers at my work, I wanted them to accept me, to guide me even—I was a beginner in scientific research, and finally I was not doing too badly, when one of them, I remember it as if it were yesterday, said to me, "How can you claim to be a Catholic, a Christian, a believer for that matter, and be a good scientist? You come in here during the weekend, and there's no difference between you and us. We accept you; you accept us. We are excited together. We follow the rules of scientific research today, and you're totally indistinguishable from any of us and a good addition to our group." (I felt very grateful for that.) "But then you walk out of here and on Sundays you claim that a dead man stopped being dead! Are you the same person? And those two convictions coexisted. If you don't let them mix, then you live two lives."

Well, the question hit home. I had never asked it of myself. I did not experience myself as living two lives. I thought it deserved an answer to them and to me because now the question had surfaced inside of me, and I then started reading, asking people this or that. It was in the early 60s, the time of the second Vatican Council. Just reading *The New York Times* every day you read about what was going on in the Catholic Church and her efforts to speak to modernity, faith and culture, that kind of stuff. So I read it. If it mentioned anybody interesting or a book, I would get the book, etc...

The book that launched me into a reflection that has lasted till today was a book I read in 1968 called *Introduction to Christianity*, the very first part of which is on faith, on belief. What does it mean to say, "I believe"? I was fascinated by it, and very, very much impressed by one point above all. The author tells a story which comes from Martin Buber, a Jewish scholar, of a young, intelligent man, an atheist, who went around in a kind of Hitchens way and made a career of destroying people's beliefs, of attacking faith, etc... And everybody they set up against him was defeated. This guy was very smart and could see the faults in the thinking of the scholars that they had sent to debate him, so much so that scholars were afraid to confront him, which I was told is more or less the case with Mr. Hitchens these days. I didn't even know I was supposed to be talking with him, so I said "yes." Anyway, this man finally was taken to see the highest authority possible, this rabbi someplace who was the most saintly man known, and the closest to God, and was all day in meditation of the Torah, and he agreed to see the young man. So they encountered each other, and the young man gave his discourse, most brilliant ever! He outdid himself. It was just awesome, so much so that when he finished everybody was saying, "Oh my God! He'll kill the rabbi. This is just too much. How can the rabbi answer that!?" The rabbi was simply holding the books of the Torah, was looking at them and looked at the guy and said, "Yeah, alright, but *perhaps* this is true. I cannot put on the table for you the reality of God, of the Kingdom of God, the Word of God, I cannot do it, but I can tell you *perhaps* it is true." Apparently this young man was completely overwhelmed by this *perhaps* because he found in the rabbi a willingness to affirm a *perhaps*; that is to say, the rabbi was a free man. The atheist was a dogmatist; he had a certainty that the rabbi suggested could not be justified, not totally anyway.

At the end, the discussion cannot go beyond a mutual acceptance of this *perhaps*. A person of faith accepts and embraces this *perhaps*. The question is: Does the atheist? And from where does his or her certainty come? It's quite a story. It affected me. When I saw that openness, I knew that for the rest of my life I would be exploring this mysterious *perhaps*.

So what I will say tonight about faith and politics, at least on the side of faith, assumes the *perhaps*. The question is, does politics? What kind of politics is consistent, coherent with this *perhaps*? What kind of politics is open enough to this *perhaps*? In some ways, as we will see, although in an entirely different language, it will be argued that the contribution of faith to politics is precisely this *perhaps*. It's precisely the opening, the "broadening of reason" that Rita reminded us the Pope called it. It's the opening beyond frozen views, predetermined views, ideological views of human life and the human person. An openness to go as far as we can in one's investigation, in one's reasoning, in one's exploration of the mysterious realm of the *perhaps* once it is admitted. This will be given fancy names, but in my opinion this example is exactly the point I want to make. I want to make the contribution that faith opens politics to the *perhaps*. This is my proposal.

The author of the story of the rabbi was Martin Buber, but that was not the book I was reading. The book I was reading had another author. He was a young German priest. His name was Joseph Ratzinger. And the title of the book is *Introduction to Christianity*, which has been reissued after Ratzinger has found a new job, and he said he wrote a different introduction to it, but said he would not change a word of anything inside. So the *perhaps* and the story is there.

The importance of the *perhaps*, the importance of this contribution that faith can make to politics can be seen also, again following the steps of Ratzinger, in a discussion he had less than a year before he was elected

Pope with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, an atheist, secularist—whatever you mean by that, of an impeccable fame and intelligence. Especially, people who knew Habermas personally and thought of his concern he has developed about the present inability to find a common basis that will serve humankind today to make ethical judgments that will guide politics. Habermas is looking for some ground that would make possible a conversation, a dialogue because people’s ideas of all these things, of everything that comes up in the discussion are radically different and determined in their ways, so to speak. So people thought, well, it would be fun to have a discussion on that, knowing very well that Ratzinger’s also concerned about the same thing. Why don’t we bring them together and have a discussion about it? It’s bound to be interesting—the atheist and the almost Pope. So they did, and you can read it, the initial essays of each one and then their own discussion in this book by Ignatius Press, *The Dialectics of Secularization on Reason and Religion*. There is Ratzinger; there is Habermas.

I began with the simplest explanation I can give you of my claim about the intersection between faith and politics as primarily being the opening up of the *perhaps*. Now we will see this applied in a certain way in this discussion between Ratzinger and Habermas. At the beginning, Ratzinger says, confirms the motivation for it. “There seems to be no basis today, or agreement on the basis for legal and ethical control of power.” It’s put in terms of power. And then you can imagine the list of reasons why this is so. “The great changes in all areas of human knowledge, the phenomenon of globalization, the interaction between different political, economic and cultural mechanisms of power control,” all of these things that characterize the present situation. He says, “How can cultures encountering one another find ethical bases to guide their relationships along the path that will permit them to build up a common structure that tames power,” because otherwise power is loose. The greatest power will affirm itself, and it will rule. Power needs to be tamed, but how? What can there be that imposes a legally responsible order on the exercise of power? The difficulty today is in finding this acceptable basis to agree even on what the common good of the society is. What it entails? Why one must do good even when it entails harm to oneself? Based on what? Each side or system would have its own answer, but you need one at the global level. The collapse of all moral certainties that is around the world today is due to the triumph of relativism. We need to be open to the totality and the broader dimension of something that will bring us together that can overcome these divisions, and the proposal he makes is human experience. We need to look at how being human is experienced within these cultural political systems because we can appeal to that if we can find that there is some kind of common human experience or experience of the human. But “what kind of experience will show this to us?” he asks. Is there such a thing as a common experience of our humanity? And then he says, “Consider the question of politics. The task of politics is to apply the criterion of the law to power thereby structuring the use of power in a meaningful manner.” How is that for a precise term? “In a meaningful manner.” This raises the question, of course, obviously, what is a meaningful manner? How does the law come into being? Because it says, “to apply the criterion of the law to power” and in this way tame the power. But “the criterion of the law,” what does that mean? How does the law come into being? What must be the characteristics of law if it is to be the vehicle of justice and not the privilege of those who have the power to make the law?

An apparent solution, a political solution, is immediately thinkable, and we all embrace it, and that is the establishment of a democratic society in which all collaborate in the genesis of the law. At least this minimizes the chances of power affirming itself, the greatest power winning out. But the problem is that total consensus is difficult to achieve, democracies of the size, for example, of ours, require that the people delegate others to make these decisions. That’s why the second part of this presentation tonight is so important. We are about to be asked to delegate our involvement to two of these four people that are running for national office. We need to elect representatives to speak for us. Democracy can only work that way, and then we follow the majority rule, more controllable now because it’s within the elected representative body.

“The problem is that the majorities can be blind or unjust. The majority principle leaves open the question of the ethical foundation of the law, namely, is there something that can never become law, or always remain an injustice?” This is the question: “Is there something that can never become law but always remain injustice?”

Is there something that is by its very nature law, something antecedent to any majority decision, something which must be respected in the decisions of the majority? Some affirm “self-subsistent values that flow from the essence of what it means to be a human being.” Kind of a natural law, values that are supposed to apply globally and multi-culturally. But can this claim or this hope be sustained? Can this conviction be sustained when it is clear that the obviousness of the values is not acknowledged by every culture? The fact of the matter is that it’s true. So an appeal to universal values really doesn’t get you anywhere. Think of the discussion about human rights, and in any case, what is to be done when some sense of values see no problem with things like terrorism pursued on behalf of a defense of a human right or a value.

“Another source is religious fanaticism,” says Ratzinger. “It raises the value question today: Is religion a saving and healing force, or is it an archaic and dangerous force that builds up false universalities, therefore leading to conflict, intolerance and terrorism. Must religions be places under the guardianship of reason, with carefully marked boundaries, and if so, who can do it and by what authority?” It is quite an honest picture of today. I am impressed. He doesn’t hold anything back. “Add to the problem the new forms of power that we have today. Man is now capable of making human beings, of producing them in the laboratory. Man becomes a product. Man is in touch with the sources of his own existence.” How to avoid the strength of the temptation to construct the right man at long last?—the eugenics temptation, to experiment with human beings, and then discard those that are not interesting as rubbish. In fact, and this well may be the ultimate step, we have reached the level, not only do we have no apparent authority found at the global level to deal with this, but there doesn’t even seem to be a method; that is to say, we have reached a level of questioning the reliability of reason itself; this is all we have. All we can appeal to as human beings is reason, a sense of a certain logos, a logic, a source of meaning, the reality of meaning, but today this is doubted. It has become possible to see no meaning in absolutely anything. Reason, some say, has discredited itself. The atomic bomb is a result of reason. Upon what, therefore, can we base a common ethical education today?

The attempt of the natural law is difficult to pursue. “The instrument of the natural law has become blunt. I do not intend to appeal to it. The idea of natural law presupposed a concept of nature in which nature and reason overlap since nature itself is rational. This view of nature has today capsized. Nowadays we hold that nature as such is not rational even if there is a rational behavior in nature. So what is left?” He goes back again “to have a confidence in the proposal that there is a common experience of humanity,” and, as we will see, it is an experience of desire. Being human is having certain desires. And he proposes that those desires be “reasonably explored,” but can reason do it? In order to do that, we must have the broadest possible view of reason. Reason must accept the *perhaps*. This acceptance of this open field—reason to continue looking for what it is that satisfies human desires—“serves as a process of struggling against the pathologies of religion, and the pathologies of reason.” He ends with that.

Again, this is very interesting and very important because it again shows that the hope that we can emerge or move beyond this present impasse which will get and gets progressively more tense every day, lies in this strange relation between faith and reason in which faith opens reason to a *perhaps*. In order to do that, of course, faith must embrace its own *perhaps*.

Now, that’s Joseph Ratzinger in 1968 and Joseph Ratzinger talking with Habermas. When he gets to be Pope and is amidst his own, he sounds a little bit different, but makes the same point, only now in a more fancy, sophisticated way, a more religious way. I thought we could follow the presentation in *Deus Caritas Est*, his very first encyclical, “God Is Love,” which has a strong section on faith and politics. I don’t think we’ll have much time beyond that because I have notes from *Spes Salvi*, and we need to talk some more about faith and desire, but we have faith as a common point each week, so we can continue exploring what this view of faith really implies.

The section on politics of the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* is number 28, and it begins with a great quote from St. Augustine. The Pope is very attached to St. Augustine. In fact, I’ve been reading an essay he wrote about

*The City of God* and St. Augustine's politics in which he very much sounds like himself. I think a lot of his thinking is influenced by St. Augustine. But anyway, the famous quote, "If justice is absent, what are kingdoms if not a huge empire of theft? *Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocinia?*" Crooks! That is, applications of selfish power. Kingdoms of the world where justice is lacking become instruments of the most powerful powers. But where does this sense of justice come from? Not directly from faith. The Church recognizes a legitimate distinction between the Church and the State that searches for this justice, that is, has the responsibility of pursuing this justice. He quotes the words of Jesus about God and Caesar, he quotes the Second Vatican Council about the "legitimate autonomy of the temporal sphere." These two are distinct. The search for justice and the application of justice is the task of politics. Keep remembering an earlier forum where this is said in a simpler way. You could say that the task of politics is to search for justice, but what have you said? Just a bunch of words, unless you relate it to something that has awakened your interest like the presentation just made. To say that it is up to politics to look for the basis that can be able to help us today to create that global unity that can protect us from the pathologies that we find both in religion and in politics.

Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics. The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. But this presupposes an even more radical question: what is justice? The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.

Now this is quite a claim. Is it obvious, or do we feel like questioning this because what you will see here is a reference to something that has been a constant teaching of the Church, and you can read it in St. Augustine and *The City of God*, and it is what is otherwise known as the doctrine of original sin, that human reason is weak. It's all we have, for God's sake! Nothing can violate reason. We can't accept things that are unreasonable, but reason exists in us in a weakened way. Again, if one does not believe in the proposal of original sin, one could still look around to see if there is evidence for this weakness, this tendency to follow what he calls "the dazzling effect of power and special interests." I think there is enough evidence that that is true, wherever it comes from.

And then he has this amazing statement right after that line, "Here politics and faith meet." So there is a point of encounter between faith and politics. How do we understand that? "Faith," he says, "is an encounter with a living God that opens new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason," and to quote our friend Dr. Pollack, "beyond the sphere of the unknown to the unknowable." But just that fact, the proposal that there is an unknowable, the inspiration, if you wish, to search for it, just that fact, has an effect that it opens up reason. It introduces the *perhaps* into politics, into reason engaged in politics. "From God's standpoint," he says, "faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith, [by affirming the reality of the unknowable] enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly."

Faith and reason must be in harmony, but faith proposes our ability to see more, and as such can strengthen reason in its path towards knowledge and in its struggle against ideologies that would stop it, that would want to build a fence and not allow reason to go further, and which can then be used translated into forms of political power.

"The aim of the Church," he says, "is not power over the State or to impose on those who do not share faith's ways of thinking or modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is to help purify reason and to contribute here and now to the acknowledgment and the attainment of what is just."

We don't have much more time. I propose to you the argument we have heard with the *perhaps*, with the discussion with Habermas made in a much more solemn, encyclical-type, academic way. But to see through this academic layer (and I love it, of course; it keeps one employed!) and go to the heart again, I would like to end with something that allowed us to see once again that the real Ratzinger still lives. That was a speech he could not make. He had been invited by the students and the faculty of La Sapienza University in Rome to come and address them on some big occasion, but some members of the faculty and other student groups objected. They felt he was unacceptable. They didn't know whether to dis-invite him or not, and the university was paralyzed, so he just decided to cancel it, but he had prepared the speech, so he published it. I'm interested in his conclusion because the question that keeps coming again and again during the speech is, "What does the Pope have to say to you today?" Like saying, Why am I here? Why do I think I have something to contribute, or do I just want to affirm the whole Catholic thing? Can he make a proposal without it immediately beforehand just being rejected? And he says, "We are in danger. The greatest danger facing the world, especially the Western world, is that man is surrendering when faced with the question of truth." Remember the last point? Reason itself is questioned. When that happens, he says, "reason ultimately folds up from the pressure of interests and the attractiveness of utility." It is the death of reason. Though reason exists, what's left, with a much smaller dimension of acceptance, but eventually that will go.

The Pope's, and by extension the Church's, and by extension the faith's contribution to reason and to politics therefore, because politics is the task of reason, is this— "to keep alive the sensitivity for truth." And that term, "sensitivity for truth" was not original. It was used by Habermas in the discussion, by Habermas. The need we have to revive today, to light up, and not be afraid of truth—a sensitivity, a love for truth, to keep this alive, "to invite reason ever anew to set itself to a quest for the truth, for goodness, [for justice] for God;" to have the courage to pursue this task. Once again, the point of intersection—the opening, the broadening, the purification of reason, or just, as he said back in 1968, the *perhaps*.

That's all for tonight.